



Tanya Lukin Linklater's *Choreography of Space*

With a two-person exhibition currently on view at the Art Gallery of Alberta, as well as recent projects in Vancouver, Montreal, Oakville and Saskatoon, perhaps more than any previous year, 2016 has been one of conversation and exchange for Alutiiq artist Tanya Lukin Linklater.

BY KARI CWYNAR

Tanya Lukin Linklater

begins our Skype conversation with a long description of her most recent performance, which took

place the previous week at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. She carefully outlines the space, the dancers, the musician, the text, the backstory and the moment of performance. This isn't unusual; I've observed that Lukin Linklater speaks of her projects by way of her working relationships and the process of creation. She does not make statements about any predetermined artistic objective, but instead allows meaning to unfold between the artist, her collaborators, the audience and the institution.

From the first time we spoke, when I asked her last September to be part of an exhibition I was co-curating, Lukin Linklater communicated through the work of others, past and present. My co-curator Kendra Sullivan and I had introduced our exhibition, *Accompaniment*, to her as one about relationships—the ways in which one's work exists through and with others, as an accompanist among other performers rather than as a solo endeavour. We knew Lukin Linklater seldom works alone; the role of the choreographer, one of her many hats, necessitates that. But she appeared on the computer back in September and began telling us about the objects that live on her coffee table in North Bay: four Yup'ik dance fans purchased in Bethel, Alaska, fringed with caribou beard and a traditional wooden bowl she commissioned from fellow Alutiiq artist Doug Inga.

These objects from her living room were then shipped to EFA Project Space in New York City and laid on a bench, which somehow seemed shocking when presented as an exhibition, despite the many artists who relish in such apparent subversion of artist creation; in fact, the actual shock was the ease with which Lukin Linklater presented the idea. For her, this was not a subversive gesture at all, or even a conceptual one, but simply as a project that could speak volumes to questions of distance, home, the dispossession of land and sacred object, and, perhaps, to the rules of contemporary art. Her re-presentation of objects by other artists was simple, unexpected and unsentimental. They were an opening to a set of universal questions.

Lukin Linklater works in performance, video, installation and text, moving fluidly between different disciplines. Her process involves translating and re-presenting existing objects and stories with others—translations and conversations that then lead to moments of public performance. For example, at the exhibition's opening reception, the living room objects and the bench became

Previous pages:
Documentation of the the
2014 featuring
Stefan St. Laurent (left)
and **Tanya Lukin Linklater**.
Photo Christian Leduc

Tanya Lukin Linklater
Slow Scrape 2013-2015
Documentation
of performance with
Ziyian Kwan at Western
Front Gallery,
Vancouver, 2015



Neither the production nor the reception of art becomes a fixed exchange, but rather a dialogue without an imposed ending.



Tanya Lukin Linklater
Accompaniment 2015
Courtesy the artist



Yup'ik dancer **Mary Ann Sundown** at Cama-i Dance Festival, Bethel, Alaska, 1998.
Photo James H. Barker

Opposite:
Tanya Lukin Linklater
An accumulation - A relief 2016
performed by **Mique'l Dangelil Peggy Lee and Ziyian Kwan**
Courtesy Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery

the score for an improvised performance by musician Laura Ortman. Lukin Linklater provided direction; she created a structure to the score and set Ortman's performance in relation to the objects and the bench. Lukin Linklater tells me that Western Front curator Pablo de Ocampo once posited text or language (rather than performance, choreography or image-making) as the true substrate of her work: text as a way of communicating with dancers; text as a vessel for concepts. She says her father encouraged her to write because language is portable; it is slippery, adaptable.

The role of language is clear as Lukin Linklater tells the story of the *Accompaniment* objects' travels from Alaska to North Bay to New York. In this story, as in the way that she communicates with Laura Ortman or with the dancers she choreographs, the structure and concept becomes the score from which her dancers improvise. They are in conversation throughout. Neither the production nor the reception of art becomes a fixed exchange, but rather a dialogue without an imposed ending.

An earlier work called *Slow Scrape* (2014-2015) took as its starting point a James Bay mitt, the type of moose hide mitt that Chief Theresa Spence wore during her 2012-2013 hunger strike in



Ottawa. Lukin Linklater began by interviewing her relatives about the process of making the mitts. The oral histories were translated into poems, which were then used to structure a performance. Lukin Linklater worked with Ziyian Kwan for *Slow Scrape*, a dancer with whom the artist has worked on several occasions.

Lukin Linklater's recent performance in Vancouver at UBC, part of a weekend of talks and performances titled *Cutting Copper: Indigenous Resurgent Practice*, was arranged to evoke two lines cutting across the country. Two dancers, Kwan and Mique'l Dangelil, moved on either side of the space, while cellist Peggy Lee played at the end. The performance took place in the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery at UBC as part of an exhibition of sacred objects from across the continent organized by Beau Dick. The objects, some of which were described as sentient beings, were

contributed by artists and communities, as Dick and twenty-one companions walked from UBC to Ottawa in 2014 to advocate for much needed negotiations between the federal government and Indigenous peoples.

Lukin Linklater describes the work as partly a formal structure—a line, a cutting—and the manifestation of three concepts: accumulation, relief and refusal. In this structural simplicity, she makes room for the creative language of the women she works with—the dancers' movement and Lee's knowledge of how sound moves through a cello. Lukin Linklater negotiates each working relationship, modifying and directing as the performance develops. At UBC, the performance unfolded through this particular group of authors, the headiness of the charged exhibition space and the many onlookers. Kwan and Dangelil danced up and down the gallery to Lee's music, moving across the space, looking and moving without directly engaging the audience or the sacred objects.

Lukin Linklater's work is rarely presented as a final, discrete entity. Authorship is shared both conceptually and practically with dancers, musicians, writers, poets and visual artists.



Tanya Lukin Linklater
Horse Hair: Question 1
(in three parts) 2016 Antler
velvet and brass hardware
Photo Blaine Campbell

Opposite page:
From left: Dancers **Lupe
Rodriguez, Crystal
Sepúlveda**, and **Cydney
Watson** perform *Time* at
the Culver Center in
Riverside, California, 2015.
Photo Jonathan Godoy

At UBC, the gallery was packed, and the dancers had to move through the crowd. In Lukin Linklater's performances, one is meant to feel the heat of other bodies, though their performance is spare and silent. One must be present with others, listening to each other's heavy breathing and coughing; the affective response that is part of—and reason for—all performance.

I asked Lukin Linklater if, rather than looking, other experiences of art might be more important to her—moving, sensing and speaking, for instance. While Lukin Linklater's work operates within the institutional domain of the "visual arts" in museums and galleries, she rarely makes objects. I hesitate to say that the body becomes an object, as in many instances of performance art within the exhibition space, but this is the dialectic of looking that she addresses: the gaze directed at bodies. As a choreographer, the proximity of dancers' bodies to audiences, objects and spaces complicates the gaze, and the one-way direction of looking at art. Lukin Linklater's performances interrupt the ease of looking when we are made to contend with other spatial relationships; for example,

some of spaces such as the museum bear long, fraught histories.

Based in northern Ontario, Lukin Linklater originates from two villages on Kodiak Island in southwestern Alaska. A history of anthropology in the region that began at least in the 1930s extends to the founding of the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak, where, as a teenager, Lukin Linklater had her first encounter with the institutionalization of art—her first experience of the tension between colonial and Indigenous interests in the museum context. She tells me that she keeps questioning why we make art, why we are artists. For her, it comes back to this early museum encounter and to work like James Luna's *The Artifact Piece* from 1987, in which the artist presented himself in a vitrine in the San Diego Museum of Man as a specimen of an extinct race. The reason she is an artist, she says, is because of the long history of archaeology in her area: "My people have been in relation to museums, to craft, to objects for so long. And also to grief."

As Lukin Linklater makes clear in the above story, she has long had a relationship with institutional space. As an Alutiiq artist, she maps non-Alutiiq spaces through the body, working with and honouring the work of other women and Indigenous artists and raising questions whose answers might otherwise be taken for granted. What kind of space is being mapped, and by whom? What



is the relationship of an artist to home and away, to the short-lived exploration of an exhibition space? How does one temporarily inhabit space amidst the legacy of dispossession and displacement? How does one inhabit space next to others and next to objects?

This coming fall, Lukin Linklater will collaborate with poets Layli Long Soldier and Leanne Simpson, curator and writer cheyanne turions and poet/musician Tara Williamson at Artspace in Peterborough. Williamson will perform Simpson's poem "Constellation." Lukin Linklater, turions and Long Soldier will respond and the outcome will remain as an exhibition. Again, the link is in language, in a group of Indigenous women writers and poets mapping a space. As Lukin Linklater says, these relationships already exist, but the project will attempt to conceptualize the space of Indigenous women in the gallery.

Lukin Linklater's work is rarely presented as a final, consumable entity. Authorship is shared both conceptually and practically with dancers, musicians, writers, poets and visual artists. These are not the characteristics of her work per se—one could speak instead about the spare formal qualities of her performance, video and poetry. Instead, the many-authored, improvised and ongoing nature of her work comprises an inherent ethic. She creates

responsibility on the part of the viewer to establish meaning, and forgoes stability in favour of shifting lenses: choreography; the history of performance; the use of the score as a structuring device; dance; poetry; conceptualism; familial genealogy. This may seem simple, but it feels radical today. This work, and the politics embedded within it, reveals its vitality when set within the pervasive strictures of contemporary art; set against the laundry list of artistic practices that have been denied that label throughout the twentieth century and still now. When the status quo of art and the kinds of work and artists that are supported by dominant institutions have become so frustratingly restrictive, when the processes of valuation continue to honour the solo artist and the discrete object, Lukin Linklater makes her own rules, and in the process has created an opening: some room to breathe. ●